



Department of Planning and Zoning



The Planning Board's Role and How Citizens Can Affect Its Decisions

INTRODUCTION

The Planning Board welcomes your interest and participation in the County's growth and development process. The Board's recommendations and decisions on development and zoning proposals benefit greatly from citizens expressing their concerns about projects that affect them and their community. Participation by an informed public is essential to the proper implementation of the General Plan and functioning of the land use planning process in Howard County. This brochure provides answers to frequently asked questions about the Planning Board's role in the land development process.

THE PLANNING BOARD

The Planning Board is a five-member board of County residents, nominated by the County Executive and confirmed by the County Council, who serve five year terms on a volunteer basis. Board members receive compensation for expenses. Planning Board meetings are usually held biweekly, alternating between Thursday mornings and Wednesday evenings. The Board holds an informal pre-meeting, open to the public, at the Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ) office one-half hour before the formal meeting time.

A Planning Board agenda containing scheduled cases, meeting dates and times is posted at the DPZ Public Service Desk and DPZ's section of the County website (www.co.ho.md.us). Meetings are usually held in the Ellicott Room on the first floor of the George Howard Building.

WHAT IS THE BOARD'S ROLE?

The Planning Board makes recommendations to the Board of Appeals, Zoning Board, or County Council on matters related to planning and zoning, and renders a final decision on selected development proposals. Before making a recommendation or decision, the Planning Board holds a public meeting or public hearing that provides an opportunity for interested persons to provide comments or evidence. The Board has the following areas of responsibility:

Issuing Recommendations: In its advisory role, the Planning Board makes recommendations on the following types of petitions:

- # Petitions to the Zoning Board for zoning map amendments and Preliminary Development Plans.
- # Candidate projects in the Capital Improvement Program.
- # County Council bills or resolutions that propose amendments to the Zoning Regulations, Subdivision and Land Development Regulations, Guidelines for updating the Howard County General Plan, or revisions to the County's General Plan, Water and Sewerage Plan, Solid Waste Plan, or Recreation and Parks' Master Plan.
- # Any other matters before the County Council related to planning and zoning.
- # Petitions that will be considered by the Board of Appeals for conditional uses, variances, and nonconforming uses if the Hearing Examiner's position is vacant or the Examiner has a conflict.

Issuing decisions: The Zoning Regulations require approval by the Planning Board for certain development plans in districts that allow greater flexibility in site planning or that may have significant development impacts on existing neighborhoods, the environment, roads, and utilities. The Planning Board can approve or deny a proposed plan, or approve a plan subject to modifications.

These plans include where applicable, Sketch Plans, Final Development Plans, and certain Site Development Plans for: the MXD (Mixed Use), NT (New Town) PGCC (Planned Golf Course Community), PSC (Planned Senior Community), R-ED (Residential: Environmental Development), and CC (Convenience Center) zoning districts.

WHAT IS THE BOARD'S AUTHORITY?

Where the Planning Board is authorized to approve development plans, criteria and guidelines for the Board's decisions are provided in the Zoning Regulations. The Planning Board must base its decisions on these provisions of the Zoning Regulations.

For example: the Board does not have the authority to require off-site road improvements. Members cannot change a property's zoning or refuse to hear a case. The Board can consider how the new developments decision will affect required open space, buffers for adjoining properties and other factors, which may influence its compatibility with the surrounding neighborhoods.

THE BOARD'S DECISION

The Board usually votes immediately after the presentation and discussion of a case. The Board may defer a recommendation or decision for two weeks to allow members to visit the site, have a work session, or consider additional testimony. Decisions are final when the written decision (if required by the Zoning Regulations) is signed, usually at the Board's next meeting, or when the Board signs the approval letter (for decisions not requiring a Decision and Order or a written recommendation). The Board forwards its recommendation and a DPZ staff report to the Board of Appeals or Zoning Board before these boards make a final decision after another public hearing.

HOW CAN CITIZENS PARTICIPATE?

Interested citizens are strongly encouraged to take part in the Planning Board process. Testimony to the Planning Board may be made either verbally or in writing, depending on whether there is a public meeting or public hearing. To speak at a Planning Board session, you must sign the Sign-in Sheet on the lectern near the entrance to the meeting room, or may respond when the Board inquires about additional testimony. Copies of the Board's agenda are also available at the Sign-in Sheet. A limited number of Technical Staff Reports for each case are available on a table in the front of the meeting room.

To present testimony, come forward to the microphone at the front of the meeting room when the chairperson calls your name from the Sign-in Sheet or asks for additional comments. State your name clearly before presenting your comments. A community association is encouraged to appoint a spokesperson to testify on its behalf. Please be succinct. If you agree with previous comments, please state your agreement rather than repeating the comments. You may introduce any information that you believe is relevant to the Board's deliberations; however, the Board may request that you limit your comments if it believes the testimony is not relevant or is outside the scope of its responsibilities.

For certain matters, the Zoning Regulations or County Code requires that the Planning Board hold a public hearing. If a public hearing is not required, the Board holds a public meeting. Public hearings have more extensive public notice requirements and more formal procedures than public meetings. Public hearings will be scheduled for a specific starting time, and persons presenting testimony must be sworn in. Written testimony will only be accepted if submitted at the public hearing. For public meetings, speakers are not sworn in, and written comments may be submitted to DPZ any time before the Planning Board meeting.

FINALLY...

The Zoning Regulations and the General Plan govern the Planning Board's actions. Your review of these documents may help to focus your comments and testimony. In order to make the best decision possible, it is important that the Board have the benefit of testimony from all interested parties.

The Planning Board members thank you for your participation in the process.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE...

This brochure is meant only to provide a general overview of the duties and responsibilities of the Planning Board. More detailed information is found in other documents including the County Code and the Zoning Regulations.

For more information contact

The Howard County Department
of Planning and Zoning,
410-313-2350, TTY
410-313-2323, or
www.co.ho.md.us
or visit Planning and Zoning's
Public Service Desk on the
first floor of the George Howard

Building, 3430 Court House Drive,
Ellicott City, MD 21043.

Office hours are: Monday
through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to
5:00 p.m.

Written inquiries may also be
sent to our office at the above
address.

5/24/02